

ENTRIES FROM A TRIP HOME

by

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Entries From a Trip Home

Vulnerability in Cinema Verite

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Ann Schaetzel

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 18, 1980, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies.

ABSTRACT

Cinema verite is distinguished from other genres by its refinement of means to make spontaneous revelations of character and situation. Because cinema verite can reveal extemporaneous behavior more easily and more acutely than other filmmaking techniques, its subjects are inherently more vulnerable to exposure than are subjects in directed or rehearsed films.

Consideration of vulnerability as a key element characterizing the form and affecting audience response to cinema verite opens up criticism of the form in a number of ways:

It explains more fully audience discomfort with cinema verite, because it suggests that in cinema verite the audience's affiliations shift between filmmaker and film subject. It underpins discussion of the cinema verite filmmaker's responsibility to and relationship with the film's subjects. It suggests a perspective from which to examine humor in cinema verite. Finally, it is one explanation of the particular force of this form, a force that can be used or abused.

accompanied by videotape

Thesis Supervisor: Richard Leacock
Title: Professor of Cinema

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated . . .

Article IV, The Constitution
of the United States

A charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld, --
The lady dare not lift her veil
For fear it be dispelled.

But peers beyond her mesh,
And wishes, and denies, --
Lest interview annul a want
That image satisfies.

Emily Dickinson

The contemplation of things as they are,
without substitution or imposture, without
error or confusion, is in itself a nobler
thing than a whole harvest of invention.

Francis Bacon

ENTRIES FROM A TRIP HOME

VULNERABILITY IN CINEMA VERITE

Cinema verite, "that cinema taken directly from life,"¹ at its best and at its worst takes as its subjects people who are not actors and reveals them through their own gestures, manners, speech, and acts. The people who become subjects of cinema verite films are exposed as they are--without costumes, scripts, or rehearsals--to the view of an audience or public they do not know. The term "access" is sometimes applied to that benefit of intimacy that a cinema verite subject accords a filmmaker whom he trusts or whom he allows to film for some other reason. Access implies that the filmmaker has overcome certain barriers to get close enough to his subject to reveal him as fully as the filmmaker's ability and understanding permit. Often, in cinema verite, that revelation occurs when the filmmaker either points out or pulls away his subject's veil of social defenses--the veil that customarily protects the individuality of one anonymous person from another. In doing so, he renders the subject "vulnerable" or exposed, in some basic way, to the audience.

"Cinema verite" refers to a wide range of films which have in common an unencumbered method of filming that has

¹Jonas Mekas, Movie Journal. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972, p. 153.

allowed the recording of moments that would have passed long before more elaborate or static equipment and crews could be set in motion. Here, however, I am restricting my discussion to the disquieting side of cinema verite, not because the form is always disquieting but because I think that this aspect of the form reveals an intrinsic quality of the technique that warrants more attention than it has received.

Consideration of vulnerability as a key element affecting audience response to cinema verite opens up criticism of the form in a number of ways:

-First, it offers a fuller explanation for general audience unease with cinema verite, an unease often explained simplistically as a reaction to the unfamiliar.

-Second, it opens discussion of the filmmaker's responsibility to the film's subjects. Cinema verite moves relatively easily into the private realm, especially into the private lives of unsophisticated people who may acquiesce because they are cowed by the authoritative presence of filmmakers with complicated equipment. Intrusion into the private sphere raises ethical questions for the cinema verite filmmaker and for his audience about their right of access to private lives.

-Third, it suggests a perspective from which to view humor in cinema verite and to judge its function, a critical factor in the relationship of filmmaker, subject and audience

in cinema verite.

-Fourth and more generally, it is one way to explain the particular force of this form, which hits strangely close to home.

When I first saw cinema verite films four years ago, I disliked them. I felt seasick watching a handheld camera. I was irked by flawed images and unpolished techniques that forced me to think about the filmmaker and the business of filmmaking rather than the subject of the film. I was disturbed by structural diffuseness in many of the films I saw and thought that such diffuseness only represented a lack of discipline. I was used to seeing dramatic films, every aspect of which is ostensibly shaped and controlled: I went through mental gymnastics when I watched films made with a spontaneous camera. It was hard for me to watch, for example, a badly exposed scene and excuse it because of the exigencies of the filmmaking process, of which I knew nothing. I construed as purposeful every detail in a film: therefore, when technical problems distorted the picture of a subject in a cinema verite film, I thought that the distortion was the filmmaker's way of subjectively rendering the subject. The filmmaker was usually a shadowy presence, neither concealed nor revealed. This seemed to me analogous to an undecided first-person voice in literature; worse, it seemed

a form of evasiveness that left me in doubt as to the relationship of the filmmaker to his material.

My strongest objection to cinema verite was to its seemingly cavalier ability to render subjects at their most vulnerable. I thought that the technique yielded material that was too easily engrossing simply because it gave one a privileged view of private lives, at the expense of individuals' rights to privacy. These films made me conscious of the power of the camera and the control of the filmmaker over his material. People filmed appeared by contrast powerless. I wanted to know what entitled a filmmaker to acquire for his artifact pieces of the real world, especially when those pieces were fragments of lives, with a complex logic and explanation to which films could pay only token respect. If a filmmaker was going to appropriate the real world, I wanted more justification than simply the fact that the the world was there for the taking. I wanted a commitment of purpose from him, if not a complementary intimate exposure of himself. I was sensitive to what seemed to be invasions of privacy and felt manipulated when I was privy to scenes that I myself would not have made public--either as filmmaker or subject. I remember, for example, being very upset when I first saw "The Doctor" by John Terry. Terry's use of a wide-angle lens and interpretive camera movement biased the portrayal of the doctor in such a way that I felt my own response had no room

to evolve. More importantly, I felt that the audience was asked to laugh in complicity with the filmmaker, at the expense of an eccentric whose idiosyncracies were sad, not funny.

I have become a fan and practitioner of cinema verite. The same qualities that first troubled me I have come to see as the form's strengths. I now believe that cinema verite actually gets its force and value from the vulnerability that its techniques impose on its subjects. That vulnerability can yield existentially poignant views of individuals and their situations and so is a source of the form's truthfulness. The very fact that vulnerability is a tender issue draws the audience into active involvement in the film. The confrontations implicit in cinema verite (between filmmaker and subject, filmmaker and audience, audience and subject) are provocative: they force the audience to set its own standards, in other words, to make intellectual and moral judgments. At the same time, because people prefer to conceal their weakness and feel that it is polite to help others conceal theirs, vulnerability explains cinema verite's discomforting effect on many audiences. Unless cinema verite filmmakers deal directly with problems of vulnerability and voyeurism, appreciation of cinema verite may be restricted to the sophisticated audience that knows enough to excuse technical foibles, appreciates the unusual scope of the form,

and sees as salutary the particular discomfort that cinema verite can cause.

The traditional documentary filmmakers put subjects and audience at ease by following a clear route from conception to completion of their films. Scripts articulate their purpose and course; lights, tripods and crews fix scenes so that subjects virtually become actors. It is hard to accuse such films of invading the privacy of unsuspecting subjects, since the surrounding paraphernalia of production are constant reminders of the project's public nature.

Cinema verite filmmakers take a different tack. Their use of lightweight equipment can be deployed to sketch impromptu moments which reveal character or essence of a situation. Spontaneous, handheld cameras can catch life on the fly, before it has time to compose itself for an audience. Cinema verite's minimal crew and equipment mean that the filmmaking process, while never achieving complete invisibility, manages at least not to dominate a scene and that there is a possibility of more casual interaction between the filmmaker and the people he films, especially once they get used to each other. This means that events and personalities can be caught on film in a form that people recognize as "the way things (or people) really are." The distinction implicit in that recognition is between "things as they really are" and

things as they are conventionally presented to public view.

The audience's perception of a cinema verite subject's vulnerability stems from the expectation that public exposure is properly limited to the exposure of a public persona. This expectation explains the public's toleration of public relations images and messages as well as the corollary fascination with gossip about private lives, at once less legitimate but more compelling and more real.

Cinema verite does not respect the social rule of a public/private separation that conventionally protects an anonymous individual from an anonymous public. This kind of film often tries to find, if not the anima, at least a glimpse of something beneath the persona that is the aspect of himself a normal person offers to public observation. To get to that reality, the cinema verite filmmaker breaks a social taboo that protects private spontaneity. The prevailing social code defines private life as inviolate: in private life, one may be petty, foolish, banal, free from observation; there, one's heartfelt emotions are safe from impersonal judgment and mockery or from demand for explanations. Privacy depends on boundaries, which etiquette delineates and convention fortifies. The private is by nature immediate and ephemeral. It is always in flux and not required to be consistent. It could be considered the raw material of a life.

Audiences may welcome as revelations the realistic

development of intimate relationships in dramatic films (see, for example, "Kramer vs. Kramer" or "Scenes from a Marriage") but are offended by the presentation of very similar portrayals in cinema verite (see Pincus's "Diary," Rance's "Mom," or work by Kreines and deMott). The same nuances of gesture and expression have completely different meaning and effect in dramatic films and cinema verite films. The difference is that the dramatic version works as a parable, while the cinema verite version works as a revelation of individuality. Actors, of course, do not really expose themselves in intimate scenes, however fine their acting.

Cinema verite, like the snapshot or other record of ephemera, fixes that flux and so transforms it. Characteristics by nature private become public. Unlike a snapshot, which emphasizes the momentary nature of an act or gesture, film compiles images and scenes and gives them the appearance of continuousness, but at the same time lifts them out of specific context and moment. It is therefore deceptively easy to take as representative what one sees on film, definitive of character, behavior, activities. One believes what one sees. The vividness and immediacy of a film image is hard to gainsay or to qualify with sheer rational understanding that there may be more to a character than meets the eye, particularly when a film portrait satisfies one's

curiosity about a character. It is this authority of the image--and behind it, the authority of the "real"--that makes cinema verite a powerful and abusable instrument. Just as a juicy bit of gossip may be arresting but a distortion of character or circumstances, so incidental vivid gesture or expression or action may wrongly type character in cinema verite.

The problem of exploitation of subjects' privacy is an even more tender one with cinema verite than with other forms of public revelation because of the cross-affiliations of the audience in this sort of filmmaker. The audience is allied with the filmmaker by the fact that it observes from a safe distance, and it necessarily shares the filmmaker's view of an interpreted and restructured reality. But, at the same time, the audience of cinema verite films is outside the filmmaking process and tends to have a protective empathy with the subjects being revealed. That empathy can easily turn the audience against the filmmaker who exposes the soft underbelly of a subject. If it appears that privacy has been invaded, the audience finds itself in the uncomfortable position of having been party to the invasion. The common use of film to mythify and beautify makes invasions of privacy all the more provocative. By contrast with conventional beautification, an unflattering view shocks and offends an audience, because it betrays expectations of what film is

and does. Such disorientation has always been an important element in film, but in the case of cinema verite, if the invasion is embarrassing, the audience may feel double affront: first, at the act of intruding; second, at its unwitting implication in that act. The audience acquires, without active choice, complicity in the exposure of a subject. The filmmaker has had months to work out his right to the footage and his justifications for intrusions on his subjects' privacy. The audience, on the other hand, like a stranger stumbling into a domestic fracas, finds itself without warning in the midst of intimate revelations. I think that only a sophisticated (or jaded) audience can participate in such invasions without being disoriented by personal ethical scruples. To take a possible example from Mark Rance's film "Mom": the filmmaker wakes his mother up very late on the morning of the fashion show climaxing her career at the Fashion Institute of Design. Groggy from sleep, she pulls herself up in bed, and her somewhat wizened breast falls out of her nightgown.

Any cinema verite filmmaker deals instinctively with problems of intimacy, access, vulnerability, intrusion, prerogative, and voyeurism and finds solutions based on subject and determined by his own sense of discretion and his assessment of how much he dares or cares to disturb his audience. Some solve the problem neatly by filming public

figures, whose being in the public domain tends to strip them of rights to privacy.

Richard Leacock often takes this approach. His films investigate the person behind the famous image, not to undercut the public persona so much as to give it life, flesh-and-blood, to make it more understandable and human by its idiosyncracies and emotions. Leacock's films never seem iconoclastic. His camera gives a privileged view that seems fair to an audience, rather like a step-up that affords a fuller picture. The audience can accept the privileged view because (1) as in "Primary," "Crisis," they are part of the electorate with a claim on the elected actors in the public drama and with a need to know as much as possible about public events; or (2) as in "Stravinsky," "Eddie Sachs," "Bernstein," they know that they watch full-time performers, who expect an audience and are groomed for an audience; or (3) as in "The Chair," "Happy Mother's Day," they witness already-public events: once the bubble of privacy has been popped, there is no way to restore its pristine enclosure.

"Happy Mother's Day" solves problems of subject vulnerability and appropriateness of an outsider's view by confronting the problem head-on. It makes it the subject of the film. This film, about the sudden celebrity of the parents of quintuplets, a celebrity unsought, unwanted and exploitative, explicitly studies public/private distinctions. The audience

accepts the film's intrusion in the Fischers' lives because the intrusion has become a public fact and because the film acknowledges it. We watch other intruders, like the Chamber of Commerce, the Ladies Home Journal, The Saturday Evening Post, and forget that we are party to another, even more insistent one. The issue becomes intellectual rather than personal: we see Mr. and Mrs. Fischer as sacrificial lambs in a civic drama about individuals and society's claim on them as soon as they become famous (or public).

John Lipscomb deals similarly with the problem in "Mooney vs. Fowle," a film about a high school football game. In this local event, high school coaches are for awhile public figures weighted down by as much responsibility and ambition as their major league equivalents. Lipscomb looks for the human common denominator: he finds that although the contest is small and the performance modest, the game is the same: one man's complete effort (and disappointment) equals any other's.

One reason for the success of Leacock's films is that he avoids getting embroiled in ethical disputes with his audiences over exploitation, vulnerability and the filmmaker's responsibility. He instead settles the audience in the midst of dramatic confrontations that are absorbing enough that they forget any scruples in the excitement of the moment. He borrows on the public context of his subjects to give his

film breadth that many cinema verite films lack. The audience comes to these films with a store of information about Kennedy, Humphrey, Wallace, Stravinsky, cops, race car drivers, football coaches, teenage gangs: Leacock takes a fresh look at familiar subjects.

The fact that questions of manipulation and voyeurism do not become prominent in Leacock's films does not mean that they are not present in subtle ways. I believe that as soon as an audience realizes that it watches natural events unfolding in their singularity and that it sees people behaving and reacting extemporaneously, a fraternity is established between audience and subject that is very different from the identification an audience feels with dramatic personae or with characters in traditional documentary films who perform for an audience and whose performance is often explicitly directed at evoking feeling. In the case of cinema verite, the audience has a gut realization that the person observed is scriptless and, in a sense, unprepared, in a public space; that the next second, his live "performance" may reveal something he would prefer to keep hidden; and that the circumstances of being filmed demand heightened control or a fine performance of himself; or abandonment of restraint; or--what may be most revealing--visible self-consciousness before the camera. It is the potential for disclosure rather than the simple process of exposure that gives cinema verite its

special edge. And I think that edge exists to an extent in films like Leacock's that rarely exploit their advantage.

The vulnerability of the subject plays a part in the way humor is used and perceived in cinema verite films. One can laugh with delight, in recognition, or with sympathetic fellow-feeling, or in dozens of different states of mind, but when one laughs at a person, laughter can be, as Marcel Pagnol said, "a song of triumph. It expresses the laugher's sudden discovery of his own momentary superiority over the person he laughs at."²

In cinema verite the situation is ripe for cheap irony or laughter at a subject's expense. A gesture, nuance of expression, or fumbling inexpression can be isolated and scrutinized and become open game for comedy. Cinema verite has an easy affinity for the kind of irony that results from a privileged view of someone's less graceful moments. Wielded ungraciously, this kind of irony introduces the real possibility of voyeurism, a common charge against some cinema verite films. This kind of irony can, however, work as leavening. Ed Pincus's "Diary" makes the filmmaker's life the testing ground for film's access to intimate details of personal relations. The audience is primed by its discomfort with the hyperexposure of the "Diary"'s subjects to

²Quoted by Susan Sontag, Styles of Radical Will, New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966, p. 170.

respond with malicious glee when Pincus turns humor against himself. For example, after several domestic spats, some concerned with the presence of the camera, others concerned with the filmmaker's sensitivity, Pincus films himself on a mescaline trip. He announces that he has taken mescaline; it seems like a bad trip; and he wonders aloud where he can find comfort: "perhaps in my tape recorder . . . perhaps in contemplating my bowels." The druggy melodrama makes it in itself a funny sequence, but in context of the film, the scene gives the audience a chance to turn on Pincus in "momentary superiority," when he appears as vulnerable as have been his other subjects. It is one of the curiosities of cinema verite that audiences quickly impute manipulation to the filmmaker in sequences that do not reflect on him but does not readily give him credit for self-awareness in such sequences as this one. An audience tends to believe that self-revealing material has somehow slipped past him into the film. This selective attribution of power underscores the audience's sensitivity to subjects' defenselessness and the belief that no one (in this case, the filmmaker) would consciously mock himself.

My own film, the working title of which was "Entries From a Trip Home" and is now "A Virgin's Revenge," was a cinema verite film based on the ideas about vulnerability that I have been discussing in the preceding pages.

I had been estranged from my mother and father since I was seventeen and had had an affair with a man whom they had forbidden me to see. When I did not follow their wishes, in fact, married the man, they dismissed me from their lives and I tried to dismiss them from mine. In recent years we worked out a polite truce, but our relationship never mended well. I was displaced and resentful of them. I blamed them for having rejected me and for the repercussions that rejection had had in my life. I extended my resentment of them in a distaste for their way of life.

I decided to make a film about the way I viewed my parents and about our conflict when, in the midst of a psychological breakdown, I saw with unbalanced clarity that my resentment tied me to them as closely as would have a studied attempt to imitate or please them. The film was conceived as an attempt to express and exorcise my bitter attachment to them. In origin, it was a personal undertaking, a film that I felt I had to make for myself in order to become more independent.

Before, when I had filmed, I had been cautious in my treatment of film subjects. I had worried about abusing access my subjects granted me as token of their trust. I equated fairness with compassion, and fairness of portrayal seemed a nearly-contractual obligation for the cinema verite filmmaker. I had worried about exploitation of subjects

when the film subjects got little in return for their contribution to the filmmaker's growing repertory of work.

Shortly before beginning this film, I started to question the effect of those scruples. Fairness to film subjects usually requires some objectivity and distance from the filmed events. If one recognizes cinema verite as a form in which the filmmaker has an unequalled chance to participate, not in the sense that he can be observed as his subjects are observed, but in the sense that he can make formal use of himself as a special character, revealed by way of a singular viewpoint (to whom he has special access), that sort of participation is not naturally compatible with a balanced approach. I was particularly interested in how character could be revealed in cinema verite, and it seemed to me that one's manner of seeing the world is as strong a way of defining character as any external description. If stressed and developed in a film, the filmmaker's biases, judgments, and way of seeing or treating the world could become a formal element in the film, as invigorating and bold as the stylized writer's voice in fiction or in new journalism. There could be a rough parity between the filmmaker's vulnerability and his subject's vulnerability, and a new relationship of audience, filmmaker, and subject might develop.

I have been strongly affected by Jeff Kreines's and Joel deMott's film that followed a provincial farm couple to the

national competition for "American farm family of the year." When I saw the film, I was shocked by the filmmakers' smugness and unfeeling treatment of their subjects. The film details the trivia of the couple's life and chronicles their days so unrelentingly that the audience is nearly--but not quite--brainwashed into agreeing with the filmmakers that they have indeed depicted lives of singularly American privation. It is an offensive film, but it stays in my mind. I have come to think of it as a vivid film about class differences and tastes in which the filmmakers, without any apology, oppose themselves and their standards to the values and tastes of middle America. The filmmakers in this film are full participants because Kreines and deMott both carry single-person sync rigs and so can film each other. In the final sequence, the filmmakers realize that the festivities are over and they have not bagged an ending for their film; they may not, in fact, have gathered the material for a film. The farm couple is in their hotel room, tired, no doubt, of the filmmakers as well as of the excitement. Sick of the filmmakers, the wife has locked herself in the bathroom. Kreines and deMott make a forced entry into their bedroom in search of their final scene. Although the couple is an inarticulate pair, the intrusion is such a breach of manners that it rouses them to vivid expression. The scene is entirely concocted and manipulated by the filmmakers, and

their conduct is a hybrid of guerrilla theater and infantile monomania, but the sequence is not gratuitous because it reveals, in its blunt and amoral way, the nature of the filmmaking and the relationship, beneath social conventions, between filmmaker and subject. In that way, it is forceful and daring.

In planning this project, I wanted to make a film that was subjectively true to my experience of being in my parents' presence and unable to shake my adolescent memories and emotions. I had no interest in balancing my picture for the sake of fairness or in enlivening it with confrontation that would add drama to the film. It seemed to me that the essence of the situation was emotional repression and the stranglehold on all of us of habits compelling us to live within the patterns of relationships that we had established years before. While the stagnant situation I describe may seem inimical material for film, I thought that the tension in the situation could compensate for the lack of action. Furthermore, I wanted to buck the tendency of cinema verite to gravitate toward subjects who naturally reveal themselves, to subjects who are naturally histrionic or clearly multifaceted, or to subjects whose eccentricities make an immediate claim on attention. Prescriptions³ for cinema verite subjects always seemed empty,

³"The problem is really whether the subject fits the form . . . The 'truth' of an event, then, can be seen using the cinema verite technique only when the event is such that

calculated to straitjacket the form and yield dull films.

My strategy for the film was simple. Alone and armed with a CP-16 camera and a Nagra SN tape recorder, I would arrive in Washington, where my parents live, and I would film (without explanation) whatever resonated with my anger. I would try to sustain an egoistic view and keep it free from dilution by more reasonable feelings, so that I could see the range of feelings that had previously so perplexed and troubled me that I had warded them off as soon as they surfaced.

It was particularly important to me to show the filters through which I was filming, or seeing, my parents. I knew that because those filters were psychological and historical they were difficult to convey in film, but it seemed an interesting experiment to make with cinema verite, the form of the present moment: to try to show how the present is infused with historicity, with what one has experienced, and to show how an accurate personal rendering needs to suggest a historical context.

Furthermore, I wanted to create a structure for the film that echoed my experience of encountering my parents. I was struck by the incongruity between my parents' daily lives, their harmless preoccupations and idiosyncracies and the melo-

its meaning is externally evident and self-structured." Henry Breitrose, "In Search of the Real Nitty Gritty: Problems and Responsibilities in Cinema Verite." Film Quarterly, Summer 1964.

drama of my sense of hurt and displacement; by the contrast between the tranquility of my parents' lives and the uproar of my feelings about them. The family etiquette, which I had been tamed to accept, demanded that we not discuss painful or awkward subjects. This seemed to sentence me to an inner struggle with my anger, which I could only resolve with some sort of flamboyant rejection of their rules of behavior. The result of my parents' way of dealing with people, I thought, was a simultaneous suppression of passion and a melodramatic exaggeration of details.

To solve these two problems, I decided to counterpoint cinema verite footage of the mundane events of my parents' lives with a voice-over monologue which I would record during my stay in Washington and in which I would suggest the anger and subterfuge of my project.

The footage I shot gave a view of a comfortable, well-regulated, uneventful waspish way of life in which there was no room for emotions. The suburbs are insular and seem to encourage self-containment and self-absorption. My father, who is a retired government official, seems to have channelled all his emotion into his work. He is most aroused by international crises and knows more about the personalities of "public figures" than he knows about his children. The monotone quality of my mother's domestic life is a good foil for the small disturbances which are the only events to be

witnessed in the house: nightly, her slight drunkenness; her veiled rebuke when I lost her car keys; an over-cooked steak. The footage was evocative for me because I had witnessed these events countless times.

Although I participated in scenes that I was filming when it seemed more natural to participate than not to do so, my overall presence is slight. At the time of filming I had made the decision to allow my parents room to expose themselves without my intervention, confrontation or provocation: first, because I thought that exposure alone would reveal them and indict them; second, because I was curious about what in fact would be revealed.

In this film, I tried to develop in parallel a picture of my parents' vulnerability to me and my camera and my own vulnerability to them and the audience. I did not intend that the audience take sides but instead see the film as a small domestic drama in which both sides injure one another and in which no easy resolution suggests itself.